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BLESSED ARE THE BALANCED: A Seminarian's Guide to Following Jesus in the Academy

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DANGEROUS CALLING: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry. By Paul David Tripp. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012. 227 pages. Hardcover. \$22.99.

BLESSED ARE THE BALANCED: A Seminarian's Guide to Following Jesus in the Academy. By Paul E. Pettit and R. Todd Mangum. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2014. 137 pages. Softcover. \$13.99.

Taken together these two books present challenges and opportunities galore for thoughtful and reflective change in the formation of pastors (read: in our educational institutions and in our seminaries) and in the continuing work and ongoing growth of pastors (read: in our ongoing pastoral development) as well. They are useful reading for church workers and leaders in general, but this review will focus on the pastoral side of things.

First, be prepared to be challenged. There is strong stuff here. Neither of these books is for the weak-hearted. It is important not to let the challenges cause the reader to turn away or construct a barrier to them. It is critical to receive and understand the challenges in the context of authors who want to enhance the witness to Jesus that pastors are able to give.

Second, think behaviorally and personally. Offered in each of these books are practical encouragements and suggestions. Each book offers a number of things to first consider and then do. It is not enough to think about these books; it will be important to do some of what is suggested.

Third, these books have an agenda and flaws. Welcome to a fallen and imperfect world. The reader would do

well to draw from each of them their positive helps and not let the perceived agenda or flaws create a “throw everything out” response. In other words, stay open to the challenges and opportunities that are offered.

Tripp's book is simply an all-out invitation to pastors in their work and to seminaries in their formation process to think through those processes. Here is a sample from Tripp's third chapter “Big Theological Brains and Heart Disease”:

Have we accomplished our training task if we produce generations of graduates who have big theological brains but tragically diseased hearts? Must we not hold together theological training and personal transformation? I am convinced that the crisis of pastoral culture often begins in the seminary class. It begins with a distant, impersonal, information-based handling of the Word of God. It begins with pastors who, in their seminary years, became quite comfortable with holding God's Word distant from their own hearts. It begins with classrooms that are academic without being pastoral. It begins with brains becoming more important than hearts. It begins with test scores being more important than character. . . . Academized Christianity, which is not consistently connected to the heart and puts its hope in knowledge and skill, can actually make students dangerous. It arms them with powerful knowledge and

skills that can make the students think that they are more mature and godly than they actually are. It arms students with weapons of spiritual warfare that if not used with humility and grace will harm the people they are meant to help. (Tripp, 52–54)

And from his fourth chapter “More than Knowledge and Skill”:

You see, it is absolutely vital to remember that a pastor’s ministry is never just shaped by his knowledge, experience, and skill. It is always also shaped by the true condition of his heart. In fact, if his heart is not in the right place, all of the knowledge and skill can actually function to make him dangerous. (Tripp, 62)

With this foundational point Tripp’s entire book unfolds with plentiful examples and suggestions. Some of these examples are from Tripp’s own personal narrative; others are from the narratives of others. All in all, they are powerful examples of what he calls “heart disease” as well as significant pointers toward a healthier heart. It was hard at times to remember that Tripp does acknowledge that balancing knowledge, experience, skill, and heart is vital and holistically important, because he is such an advocate for the personal spiritual life of the pastor. But it is clear that it is a balance he seeks. “Here’s the bottom line: do we live as though we really do think of ourselves, who have been called to pastor others, as people in need of pastoring? Do we?” (Tripp, 212). Well, do we? Do I? Not so much. The challenge is there.

Towards the end of the book Tripp hits what could be too much of an individualistic note:

You have one—and only one—place to look for your rest, motivation, and hope. You cannot search for these things in yourself, in the people you serve, in the leaders who serve with you, or in your ministry success. You and I must preach an ancient gospel of grace to ourselves with fresh application and enthusiasm day after ministry day. (Tripp, 222)

True enough, but we surely also need people around us, fellow members of the community which is the body of Christ, to both preach and be that “ancient gospel of grace” to us.

Bottom line: get the book, read it, and talk about it deeply with others. This is a wonderful book for deeper discussion in small groups of pastors, but it is very useful for anyone.

Pettit and Mangum’s book focuses specifically on a seminarian’s spiritual life while at the “academy.” There are echoes of Tripp. Here is a sample from their chapter “Avoiding Spiritual Frostbite”:

Sharp reasoning skill is encouraged and honed by Scripture itself. Yet sharp thinking is no substitute for depth of character. The two are not equal in value; it is better to be a person submissive of spirit and soft of heart to the Lord’s will than simply smart. Solomon himself ended up finding this out the hard way. Nor are the two mutually exclusive. In fact a person of character who

also has discernment, including incisive, keen reasoning ability, is a person of ideal leadership quality. . . . [But] as you develop skills of reasoning, you grow accustomed to being right. As you cultivate the ability to persuade, using sound logic and articulate rhetoric, you grow accustomed to having your views accepted, adopted, and implemented. Frankly, this could put you in a dangerous frame of mind. (Pettit and Mangum, 96–97)

The balance that Pettit and Mangum seek is between what they identify as “Christian maturity” and “higher education.” Imbalance occurs when there is little interest in learning about the content of the faith; imbalance also occurs when there is little personal spiritual application in what is being learned. This book is about the development of attitudes and behaviors that work toward the balance of these two sides of what Pettit and Mangum describe as a teeter-totter.

Their practical suggestions are creative and challenging. Their “Practice of Spiritual Disciplines” section in the chapter “Disciplining Heart of Head” is a great list of twenty-two spiritual disciplines as well as their list of fourteen “Academic Disciplines” in the same chapter.

In this book the seminarian will be challenged in specific and direct ways that are crucial. It is clear that one major spiritual challenge for seminarians is, as they learn more about God (i.e., develop their knowledge), that they also intentionally stay connected to activities and to people that help them, as the authors would say, “become spiritually mature” as

they consider passages offering metaphors of growth (Eph 4:12–14), good fruit (Mt 7:16–18, 20), and walking in the light (Eph 5:8).

This book is good reading for all of us. The bottom line: get the book, read it, and talk about it deeply with others.

These two books, taken together, focus on what many, including this reviewer, believe is one of the essential ministry challenges of our time: growing Christian leaders who are as holistically healthy in spirit, mind, and body as possible in a fallen world.

I am reminded of a story about Dr. Franz Pieper (former president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and former president of Concordia Seminary) told to me by my vicarage supervisor, Dr. Theodore Nickel, himself a Pieper devotee and former vice-president of the LCMS. Dr. Nickel related that toward the end of his lectures on systematic theology Dr. Pieper would stop and encourage a discussion by asking: “Now, boys, what does all this mean in your life?” No question that Tripp, Pettit, and Mangum would like that, as I do.

I am also reminded of a comment in one of Dr. J. H. C. Fritz’s books, *Pastoral Theology*. Fritz, the academic dean at Concordia Seminary for twenty years (1920–1940), suggested that the pastor needed to learn how to read three books: scripture, flock, and self. I think Tripp, Pettit, and Mangum would approve as long as they are read in a balanced way.

These two books are calls for the integration of head and heart, and of knowledge and practice. These books are calls for the development of spiritual character in our pastors that goes far beyond knowing correct doctrine. But

they do more than offer a call for such things. They offer practical steps that we all can take.

They are steps a seminary can and should take to raise up pastors for the church; these are steps a pastor can and should take to help grow, bear good fruit, and walk in the light as the Holy Spirit beckons and energizes. There are even steps that congregational leaders can and should take to support the pastor. Bottom line: get the books, read the books, and in small venues talk more deeply about them.

Bruce M. Hartung